

A photograph of British Commandos marching through a field of tall, dry grass. They are carrying large logs on their shoulders and wearing camouflage uniforms. The background shows a line of trees and a hill.

A History of

“We looked for a dash of the Elizabethan pirate, the Chicago gangster, and the Frontier tribesman, allied to a professional efficiency and standard of discipline of the best Regular soldier.”

— BG Dudley Clarke, British Commandos Founder

ASSESSMENT AND SELECTION

BY MAJOR JOHN FAUNCE



BACKGROUND

Assessing and selecting the right person is nothing new to our military or our society. It was recently explained by author Jim Collins, who, in his legendary book *Good To Great*, explained that organizations had to “...get the right people on the bus and the wrong people off the bus.”⁰¹ Before corporate America put such a high premium on selecting individuals, militaries pioneered selection methods. The way the military does this is through assessment and selection courses.

Earliest evidence of military assessment and selection dates back to post World War I Germany, when, due to the restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles, the Germany Army could only commission a small



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⁰¹ **The Ball and Spiral Situation.** As a test of physical and group coordination, six Office of Strategic Service's candidates were asked to maneuver a ball up a spiral ramp to a shallow platform.

⁰² **The Stress Situation.** The OSS selection team developed a procedure to test the candidate's capacity to “tolerate severe emotional and intellectual strain.”

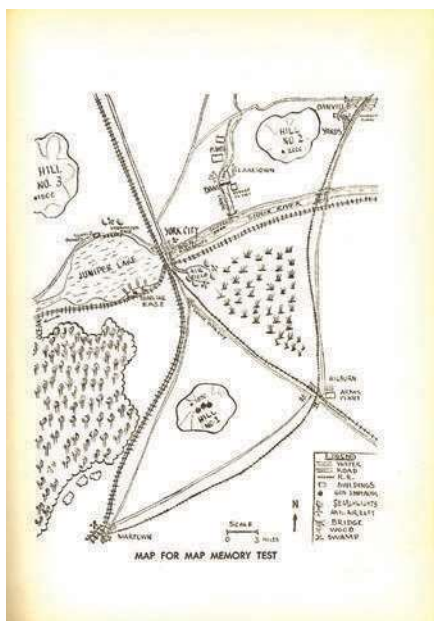
⁰³ **The Construction Situation.** As a test of leadership OSS candidates were asked to direct two assistants in constructing a wooden structure in 10 minutes.

PHOTOS FROM THE “ASSESSMENT OF MEN”

number of officers.⁰² This caused Germany to be highly selective with those commissions. The second case was pre-World War II England, which, due to the threat posed by Germany had to raise its force from 400,000 to 5 million. The need for the right people to lead such rapid growth led to the formation of the British War Officer Selection Board.⁰³

The American military also first encountered its need for assessment during World War II. In response to the growing need for clandestine and covert operations, the United States sought unconventional thinkers from

their conventional military ranks. The Office of Strategic Service, which handled these operations, commissioned a task force of psychologists to conduct a three-day assessment. They documented their methods and findings in a meticulous report called *The Assessment of Men* written in 1948. This report has since served as a sort of playbook for military assessment and selections. What was found to be predictive of success back then has stood the test of time and is alive and well in the current methodology at Special Forces Assessment and Selection.



BONUS CONTENT ONLINE
<http://www.soc.mil/swcs/swmag/archive/2902/A&S>

Are you up to the OSS standard? Download and take the selection committee's Map Memory Test on our website to see how you might have done.

EARLY ASSESSMENT AND SELECTION METHODOLOGY

In 1926, Germany wanted to select the highest caliber officer with a limited number of officer commissions. Experimental psychology, while viewed elsewhere in the world with a heavy amount of skepticism, was integral to the selection process. The German Army employed nearly 500 psychologists who designed and ran the Officer Selection Program. The explicit aim of the program was to "obtain an evaluation of general intelligence, use of will power (defined as ability to think and persevere under physical and emotional stress and willingness to push oneself) and the ability to manage (command) people, expressive movements (body language and handwriting) and their total personality (their life history told at an interview)."⁰⁴ This initial concept of looking at intelligence, physical fitness, leadership and character would become a cornerstone of all future assessment and selection courses.

The program's success was hard to measure. It was canceled half way

through the war. One reason was that this selection method caused a cultural problem. It allowed too great of a democratic selection that permitted men with the right character traits to become officers regardless of family background. The opposition was raised by current officers who favored the traditional method of selecting officers from prominent Prussian families.⁰⁵ The German Army's decision to place tradition over innovation in terms of talent management may have kept adaptive and capable officers off the battlefields of World War II Europe; a decision that had an immeasurable impact.

WORLD WAR II...IN RESPONSE TO THE GROWING NEED FOR CLANDESTINE AND COVERT OPERATIONS, THE UNITED STATES SOUGHT UNCONVENTIONAL THINKERS FROM THEIR CONVENTIONAL MILITARY RANKS.

The next notable program was the British War Officer Selection Board. In 1939, the WOSB, borrowing many ideas from the OSP and German psychologists who had published their work, set out to select officers for the rapidly growing British Army. They faced a cultural as well as process problem. The cultural problem was similar to Germany. The current officer selection process was for candidates to go before the Regular Commissions Board that was biased towards the elite classes. Questions were asked about the candidate's school, their father's occupation and income.⁰⁶ With the rapid growth in the military, the British needed a great number of officers. This caused a process problem. RCB's were historically a rejection process; with a rejection rate of officers between 20-50 percent.⁰⁷ They couldn't keep being highly selective from their elite class while also filling the necessary ranks for the growing military. While Germany would not give up tradition, Britain realized it had to address this problem and go beyond the elite class.

In 1941, in order to address these cultural and process problems, the British Army commissioned two psychiatrists, Lt. Col. T.F. Rodger and

Maj. E. Wittkower, to create a program to reduce the rejection rate.⁰⁸ The explicit aim of the program was to evaluate the candidate's "quality of social relations with superiors, equals and subordinates; competence in practical situations; and stamina over long periods under stress."⁰⁸ Candidates were taken in groups of 30-40 to remote locations for three days of evaluation. The evaluation consisted of: a detailed questionnaire of personal history, written tests looking at intelligence and perception, a series of group tests consisting of discussion and outdoor tactical exercises, a physical

fitness test and a boxing competition.¹⁰ This is the same as the OSP in regards to intelligence, fitness, leadership and character. The British model evolved slightly by adding group, not just individual, testing. This program's success, while also hard to measure, could be considered very successful from the standpoint that much of what it conducted is still being used today. The German and British selection boards heavily influenced the OSS A&S of personnel during World War II.

THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN ASSESSMENT AND SELECTION METHODOLOGY

In 1943, hardly a year after the creation of the OSS, many senior leaders felt their recruitment of personnel was conducted hazardously. The head of the OSS, Gen. William J. Donovan, directed his recruiting branch to set up an A&S program after receiving a brief from an OSS officer who recently spent time with the WOSB in London. The task given to the OSS assessment staff was to, "develop a system of procedures which would reveal the personalities of OSS recruits to

the extent of providing ground for sufficiently reliable predictions of their usefulness to the organization.”¹¹ The report was clear to point to the phrase ‘sufficiently reliable’. This OSS team adhered to a truth they believed, which was all efforts to select individuals, at best, could only arrive at “sufficient conclusions from insufficient data.”¹²

The A&S lead was Dr. Henry Murray; a Harvard psychologist who was a pioneer in personality assessment.¹³ His team screened 5,931 recruits and believed, as the name might not suggest, that they were not selecting the fit, but rather the unfit.¹⁴ The nature of the job performed by OSS agents was not and would not be made clear to several of those who were doing the selecting. Therefore, they would not be able to



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select based on a certain skill set, but rather a set of general qualifications applicable to all OSS assignments. It was so general that they identified the ideal candidate as a ‘Ph.D. who can win a bar fight’.¹⁵ The general variables looked at by the assessment committee were the following: Motivation for Assignment, Energy and Initiative, Effective Intelligence, Emotional Stability, Social Relations, Leadership and Security. In addition, specific variables were also assessed to help select candidates for certain branches based on performance. Those were: physical ability, observing and reporting and propaganda skills.¹⁶ The theme of intelligence, fitness, leadership and character has continued to exist in each subsequent A&S.

The success of the program was again hard to measure. The war ended shortly

after the selection process. However, in 1952 when U.S. Army Special Forces was made permanent, several initial members were prior OSS members so the influence of selection played a major role in the formation of SF. An exploration of the current selection of SF members shows just how close the methods remain to the OSS roots.

SPECIAL FORCES ASSESSMENT AND SELECTION

In 1987, Col. Richard Potter convinced the Army that a course to select volunteers to attend SF training was necessary. He noted that the attrition rate in the Special Forces Qualification Course was wasting millions of dollars and time. He assigned two project officers, Maj. James L. Velky

and Master Sgt. John A. Heimberger, to establish the course to find candidates that were “reasonably fit, reasonably motivated and reasonably intelligent.”¹⁷ Based on that guidance, the first steps were to define personality traits consistent with successful completion of SF training and effective duty as an SF Soldier. The desirable personality traits were formulated from a two-year study conducted by the Army Research Institute.¹⁸ Next, they determined ways to assess for those traits. Using knowledge from the German, British and OSS selections they designed a program. The project officers and seven senior noncommissioned officers validated the program by going through it themselves and then in June 1988 the cadre (now numbering 48 members) and Maj. Velky, as the first officer-in-charge, conducted the first SFAS.

In the first year they ran nine classes with an average of 190 candidates. SFAS attempted to capture a candidate’s profile by first administering a series of mental and learning tests (Wonderlic and Audio Perception Battery), personality tests (Jackson Inventory and Minnesota Multifaceted Personality Inventory). A second phase further assessed the candidate through a series of field-related assessment activities (military orienteering, an obstacle course, swim tests, short and long runs and other physical tests and problem-solving events).¹⁹

Today’s SFAS is remarkably similar to the first class. There are still physical



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For many years Special Forces Assessment and Selection was depicted with imagery showcasing the gruelling log and rifle PT, both of which have been replaced with more functional fitness exercises. U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY JASON GAMBARELLA

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Today's selection tests the candidates physical and mental toughness, as well as their ability to work under pressure and with a team. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY STAFF SERGEANT RUSSELL L. KLIKA

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fitness tests and runs, swim tests, intelligence tests, personality tests, military orienteering and problem-solving events. The problem-solving events have morphed into what is referred to as Team Week. This assesses the candidate's ability to use his attributes to adapt to an ever changing problem set while working in a group. These tests, along with peer and self-assessments, become data points that are combined to assess the Whole Man. The Whole Man concept is arrived at by taking multiple observations from multiple observers over multiple events to ensure the observations are valid and the candidate is balanced. This is perhaps the key addition that SFAS has added to the history of military A&S courses; and it is vital. Former SFAS 1st Sgt. Bobby Sinko, compared it to a stool, "A stool has to be so tall, and that all of its legs need to be tall enough for the stool to remain balanced and functional. We are looking for someone smart, in shape and gets along with others."²⁰ The Whole Man is proving to be a reliable predictor of success. The candidates who are selected at SFAS and move on to the SFQC have a pass rate near 70 percent; it is a reliable but not a perfect predictor.²¹ Some would like to see that number higher, but it is important to remember that OSS found that selection is a sufficient conclusion from insufficient data.



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THE METHODOLOGY OF ASSESSMENT AND SELECTION

In the Army, there is always a sense of 'improving your fighting position' and therefore SFAS has faced, at times, critics with how little has changed. People question relevance of events or ambiguity of the course. Some question the use of land navigation with a compass in the age of global positioning systems, yet candidates' success in this event highly correlates to successful completion of the SF qualification course.²² While assessing, cadre gives candidates very little training, guidance or feedback. All of these remain in place because they work

and accomplish the task: to screen those that are unfit for the follow-on 66 week qualification course. That is where the training will take place. It is necessary to keep screening and training separate or neither will be done well.²³ The selection must be first and requires very special cadre to assess without bias. The candidates, who are stripped of name and rank, operate in a leaderless, ambiguous environment and many struggle with the lack of guidance or feedback on performance; which they do not get until the completion of the course. This forces them to use their attributes and adapt to the problems they face. However, this is highly correlated to the environments in which SF Soldiers find themselves. The

reason highly elite units need to run such hard selection is because of the amount of autonomy graduates see in their operating environment. Given that operating environment it is imperative to 'select hard, manage easy'.²⁴

CONCLUSION

In the 90 years since the first military assessment and selection, the criteria have remained surprisingly similar. The Germans, British and Americans all valued the attributes of intelligence, fitness, leadership and character. While the Germans and British wanted to draw first from the elite classes, it was the Americans who were first to be completely unbiased by

the class of the candidate and looked instead for a general set of attributes. SFAS further refined the procedure to assess how well the candidates can apply those attributes to adapt to multiple changing problem sets over multiple days. Charles Darwin once said that it is not the strongest or most intelligent of the species that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change. This ability to adapt is the lynchpin to conducting SF missions and makes SFAS vital to the overall goal. The goal of selection and its difficulty was recently summarized by the current Special Warfare Center and School Commander, Maj.Gen. James B. Linder who said at a town hall meeting, "We need that physically fit, intelligent person who possesses social and

cultural awareness permitting them to stand in the middle of a circle of a foreign force, out-numbered, out-gunned and still influence them."²⁵ **SW**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major John Faunce currently serves as the Director of the SOF Captain Career Course at SWEG(A). He previously commanded ARSOF Assessment and Selection. Other previous assignments include Commander of ODA 3113 in 1st BN, 3rd SFG(A) from 2007-2010 with deployments to Afghanistan and Tajikistan as well as a leader development officer at the United States Military Academy from 2011-2014 after earning his Masters in Organizational Psychology from Columbia University.

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Today SFAS candidates are assessed using the Whole Man concept which takes multiple observations from multiple observers over multiple events to validate that they have the right balance of attributes.

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(Opposite page)
Students in the SUT portion of phase 2 of the SFQC learn the foundational combat skills needed to operate as part of a small team.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY
STAFF SERGEANT
RUSSELL L. KLICKA



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